



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



General Assembly Committee on Transportation Public Hearing March 11, 2009

Testimony submitted by:

Elizabeth Brown
Legislative Director
Connecticut Commission on Children

Committee Bill No. 735, An Act Improving Bicycle and Pedestrian Access

Senator DeFronzo, Representative Guerrera and members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Connecticut Commission on Children in support of Committee Bill No. 735, An Act Improving Bicycle and Pedestrian Access.

The Commission on Children actively works to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity. Over the past four years, the Commission held several major state policy forums on the issue, designed and led a series of regional forums for municipal leaders with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, wrote and distributed outreach materials to encourage families to become more physically active (*Playbook for Prevention* and a radio public service announcement), developed a proposal for a statewide data tracking system for obesity and chronic diseases, and established a state framework for departmental coordination.

Our state, like the nation, is experiencing an obesity epidemic that has a significant impact on health and the state budget. Nationally the prevalence of overweight children nearly doubled in the past 20 years and nearly tripled for adolescents. In Connecticut, 26 percent of high school students were overweight or obese in 2007. Adult obesity in Connecticut has increased dramatically as well. One in five adults (20.8 percent) were obese in 2007, and most adults (59 percent) were overweight or obese.

The health consequences of obesity are severe. Most obese children grow up to be obese adults and suffer from the conditions associated with obesity, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Obese children are more likely to smoke, consume alcohol and experiment with drugs as well as have self-esteem and health issues which negatively impact their studies and social life in school.

Obesity has costly direct and indirect consequences for families, health systems and the government programs that pay for emergency and long-term illness care. It is associated with premature death and disability, increased health care costs and lost productivity. In Connecticut, obesity-related health problems for adults cost an estimated \$856 million in annual medical expenses.

The obesity epidemic is a direct result of physical inactivity and unwise eating behaviors. Today's youth are considered the most inactive generation in history, according to the American Obesity Association. Most Connecticut high school students (55%) did not meet the recommended physical activity level, according to a 2007 survey. One in five (20%) Connecticut adults are physically inactive, meaning no physical activity or exercise in the previous 30 days outside of a regular job (2005-2007 data).

The Commission on Children strongly supports Committee Bill 735 as a means of improving the health of children and adults throughout Connecticut.

At a 2008 state forum led by the Commission on Children and the Department of Public Health, national and state experts identified bicycling and pedestrian access as a critical issue to address childhood obesity.

Committee Bill 735 would take several steps to strengthen bicycle and pedestrian options for Connecticut families. This legislation would do the following:

- establish a complete streets policy for Connecticut, designed to enable safe access for all pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders;
- make accommodations for all users a routine part of the planning, design, construction and operating activities of all highways, roads and streets in the state;
- require that at least 25 percent of certain federal transportation funds received by the state be dedicated to address bicycle and pedestrian needs, including Safe Routes to Schools programs, Safe Routes to Transit programs, Safe Routes for Seniors programs, and safe streets and traffic calming programs;
- create a state Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board with specific responsibilities to assist the Department of Transportation in improving the environment for bicycling and walking; and
- establish a Share the Road license plate fund to promote bicycle use and safety.

Enactment of this bill would result in Connecticut becoming the 12th state to have a “complete streets” – or “healthy streets” – policy, which aims to improve public health by creating safer and more welcoming environments for people-powered transportation. A recent survey of older Americans found that many wanted alternatives to driving due to high gas prices and fewer mobility options. Nearly 40 percent, however, reported lack of sidewalks and safe crossings, bicycle lanes or safe places to catch the bus near their homes. Complete streets policies tackle these issues by considering all users in transportation project design and planning.

A complete streets policy would improve the physical activity and health of Connecticut young and older residents, reduce auto emissions and improve safety. Walking and biking yield

numerous benefits for young people: weight and blood pressure control, diabetes risk reduction, improved psychological welfare, and better academic performance.

Transit-friendly, walkable communities reduce reliance on motor vehicles. Every mile of cycling that replaces auto travel prevents an average of 1 lb. of carbon dioxide, 10 grams of carbon monoxide, 0.5 grams of hydrocarbons, and 0.5 grams of nitrous oxides from polluting our environment.

Studies show people are more likely to bike or walk in neighborhoods where it is safe to do so and the proper infrastructure is present, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. When Connecticut enacts a “complete streets” policy under this legislation, the result will be healthy recreation and commuting options for children, families, seniors and all residents.

Complete streets policies have been successful in several states, including Oregon. Advocates believe the Oregon law sets the standard for bicycling and pedestrian policy and has helped the state achieve the second-highest rate of bicycle commuters in the country (behind Montana) at 1.5 percent. Between 1992 and 2005, Portland increased its developed bikeway network by 215 percent, from 83 miles to 260 miles. As a result, the number of bicycle commuters doubled between 1990 and 2000.

The legislation before you is an excellent next step to prevent obesity and to improve the health of Connecticut children and adults. The Commission on Children urges passage of the bill.

